

A Dirt Farmer Speaks...



ROY CURTIS says "Don't Sell the Farm Horse Short!"



In this pamphlet we are reprinting an abstract of an address by Roy Curtis, of Princeton, Iowa, delivered at the annual meeting of the Horse and Mule Association of America, Inc., at Chicago, Dec. 6, 1944.

Roy Curtis is a highly successful farmer from eastern Iowa, near the Illinois line. Although still a young man, he owns and has developed a splendid farm and annually markets many cattle and hogs, and from time to time surplus horses, as he raises his own replacements and sells the older ones when they can be spared. He always has done his work with animal power only.

RIGHT at the outset I want to make a statement which will not be particularly pleasing to our good friends the tractor people. Nevertheless, I know it to be sound because it is based on my twenty-one years of experience farming with horses—and close observation of my neighbors' experience both with horses and mechanical power. Therefore, I believe I can speak with a measure of authority when I say: There's no 100% mechanization of farms possible. It just doesn't make sense. And here's why.

Field work is really only a small percentage of the work on a farm. Every farmer has chores to do which cannot be done with a tractor. Fencing, tilling and that kind of work cannot be done with a tractor. You can't use a tractor to repair buildings or machinery, to load hay, move hay away, for shocking grain, loading grain bundles on to wagons, pitching them into machines, nor can you use it for husking corn, ringing hogs, cutting weeds and a hundred other jobs around the farm with which you are all familiar.

Now, what does this all add up to. Just this. Since no farm can be 100% mechanized, if we use tractors we are operating our farms part mechanical power and part horse power, and by doing that we are operating under definite disadvantages which I shall try to make clear to you. Let me outline some of the advantages of operating a farm entirely with animal power.

Some Advantages in Operating Entirely with Animal Power

One advantage that we have when we are using all horses is the large selection of different types of horses usually available. If the little boy wants a team, there's a good quiet team for him. If you have an extra heavy load to pull, you pick your best pulling team. If it is a job that is to be done when it is hot you select a more durable team.

Another advantage is flexibility. We make good use of this flexibility. On Saturdays when our boys are home and we want a team for each boy to drive, we do more of the little two-horse jobs. Then during the week when the boys are in school we give the hired man eight or ten horses to hitch on the disc.

Comparison of Horse and Tractor in Specific Farm Jobs

Now let's examine some specific farm jobs and see whether the tractor or horse contributes most to their economic and effective performance. And mind you, these jobs are right in tractor territory, jobs for which tractor people claim greatest savings.

Take plowing first. I well remember a spring when two of us put in 75 acres of oats which had been seeded to grass and had to be double-disced twice, and 90 acres of corn, the corn land all plowed that spring and disced before planting. All the



manure was hauled out and we had quite a bit as 40 heifers were fed, besides 30 head of other cattle and 20 head of horses and colts. This work was done entirely with horse power and mostly colts at that. We had a neighbor that year who was farming about the same amount of land and had the same amount of help. He used a tractor and two gang plows. We finished before he did and then went up with two gang plows, six horses on each plow, and put in one good day for him.

Yet they say that we cannot get the work done with horses. Well, in making a comparison of plowing, we did the 90 acres of plowing in less than one week. Can this neighbor afford to keep his three-bottom tractor around the whole year to save perhaps a day or two on his plowing? When it comes to discing—ten horses will do that job almost as fast as a tractor; for the little time gained can he afford a tractor? When it comes to cultivating corn he could use a two-row cultivator with horses. The tractor would not gain much time the first couple of times through because he must take it slowly while the corn is small. The third time through horses can speed up a little, too, and cultivate from sixteen to eighteen acres a day. How much faster can the tractor do the job? We have done the cultivating on 80 acres of corn in four and one-half or five days; the farmer using a tractor for the same acreage would save only a couple of days at best. To gain that minor advantage he must use his tractor at greater expense for many other jobs where no time is saved.

When it comes to haying, how much time is saved by having a tractor? The tractor does not load the hay. It does not stick the fork in. It does not move it away. You use a side-delivery rake with horses



just the same as with a tractor so nothing is gained there.

When it comes to cutting grain, we all know that you can cut your grain with one man and four good durable horses on a binder and one man can handle the whole outfit, whereas it takes two men when using a tractor. We all know that thrashing is best handled with horses. A tractor can't load the bundles on to the wagon, pitch them into the machine or shock the grain. Husking corn by hand, of course, requires horses to pull the wagon, and pickers are available that can be drawn by horses.

Some Objections to Horses Answered

There are some alleged objections to operating a farm with horses which invariably are brought forward by those committed to tractor power.

We hear about the saving in help; but when I look around I find that a lot of fellows with tractors have as much help as they ever had. As far as that goes, it isn't always the man who is getting along with less help who is making more money. Many people seem to think that help is the only thing on a farm that costs money. To get a true picture we must consider all cash expenses.

It's often said that when we farm with horses we lose a lot of time doing horse chores. Let's see whether that's really true.

If you want to keep up the fertility of your farm, for every horse you sell you should buy a cow or two. Those cows have to be milked. That takes time. So you're right back on the chores again. Then the tractor that's replaced your horses has to be serviced. That takes time and expense. Instead of an investment in horses you now have a sizable investment in cows and tractor and all that goes with it. So what have you gained in time or money by selling your horses? True you have the income from your cows. But that's needed to keep up the tractor and buy fuel for it. Therefore, your income has actually not increased.

Some farmers say that horses won't stand hard work because they heat quickly. I have found that not to be true. A horse pastured occasionally for a few days' rest and given a regular feed of grain once a day when not working will not notice the heat, if allowed water every two hours when at work.

You hear many times over that the per acre cost of plowing is so much cheaper with a tractor than with horses. But is it? I have seen no satisfactory proof. Most tractor owners, in figuring their own costs, consider only the gas and oil used, and do not know what depreciation is: but if they included true depreciation figures in their tractor cost figures, and credited the appreciation on their horses worked from 3 to 6, then sold, they would realize that horses are the cheaper.

Your investment is larger than it seems to be when you buy your tractor, because you sell your cheap plow and your cheap disc and your cheap horse-drawn machinery. You sell off your cheapest horses. Then you buy the tractor and you buy all of the high-priced equipment that goes with it, many pieces of which you use only a couple of days a year.

Some Suggestions on Managing Horses

At the present time we have a 500 acre farm which we bought last year, 400 acres of which we are farm-



ing with horses. We do not control the other 100 yet, as it was leased out. This land formerly was farmed by four different tractors. We have the help of one hired man and our boys, the eldest of which is 16, when they are home Saturdays and through the summer. I've farmed with horses for twenty-one years, and have learned some things about the management of horses to get best results.

For one thing we have made a practice of turning our horses out at night the year round. In the winter they have cornstalk pasture, and all the good alfalfa and timothy hay they want, but no grain when not at work. Protection is provided. This protection can be an open shed, a straw stack, a grove of trees. We find they don't notice the cool nights as much in the spring after they start to work. Also they stay in better flesh with less grain. Horses should have a chance to drink after their evening meal, and they usually don't have this chance when kept in the stall all night. Salt is available at all times. In working season our horses on good pasture always get one feed of grain per day in the morning, even when not at work; three grain

feeds daily when at work, and all the good hay they want. Part of it is alfalfa and clover mixed.

In getting jobs done with our horses, we find the tandem disc a big time saver, and I don't know why more farmers haven't adopted it. I think if they had there wouldn't be so many tractors in use today. We double-disc our cornstalk land in the spring before seeding. The oats are then broadcast and double disced in. If grass seed is sown at the same time as oats, we disc shallow and pull a harrow behind the disc, to cover everything. We find it is easier to drive eight or ten horses on a tandem disc than it is to handle five or six on a gang plow. With a plow you have to turn around and set your plow right; with the disc you just hitch up and keep going. With ten horses on a tandem disc, with two sections of a harrow behind, you can cover almost as much ground as a tractor. We also disc our land before plowing for corn. It speeds plowing.

We always use six horses on a gang plow. The size of the horses does not make much difference for field work. Many people have the idea that they need big horses for field work in tandem. I've found medium weight horses best for discing and field work. Most of the work required by horses which supplement the tractor, however, is pulling heavy loads. This requires a horse that is big and dependable.

We use four horses on a two-row cultivator, or if we want to give all of our boys jobs to do, we send them out with single-row cultivators. On the binder we aim to use good durable horses when it is hot.



You hear the statement so often, "Well, there is no use to farm with horses because you cannot get help to drive them." I cannot say that I have had that difficulty. I have had many different men and I think the answer is in the way you hitch your horses and send your men out. I have hired older men who never had driven more than four horses and they have gotten along fine with eight or ten.

We break in a green man by using part of the multiple-hitch system. In starting him out we buck the back horses and tie them ahead and we give him all four lines. In a little while the back horses are broken in so they take care of themselves, while the man is learning to drive. After a little while he isn't bucking them, but is probably tying one or two of them in.

We find that by fall plowing about half of our ground we can spread our time out a little more. In that way on one level farm, where we raised about 80 acres of corn, we would fall plow about 40 acres and in the spring the other 40 acres could be plowed by one man in about a week's time. With two teams on the job, the plowing and harrowing could be completed in less than a week.

Some Disadvantages in Using Tractors

I want to point out some of the disadvantages in using tractors for farm operation—disadvantages that many farmers have overlooked, but which are very real and costly nevertheless.

I often think of the tractor as being the same as the locomotive on a train. Many people think, "I can buy a tractor for so much. I am going to sell my horses and buy one." Actually the tractor is only part of the required investment. They still need the rest of the train or the equipment to go with it. Tractor drawn implements are high-priced while horse drawn implements are relatively cheap. Many tenants could buy farms of their own with what they have invested in tractors and equipment.

Speaking of the tractor not being flexible, I am reminded of a neighbor who bought a tractor and manure spreader. He sent his boy out to haul manure with this tractor and spreader. He had probably around \$1500 invested in the outfit, and the boy was loading manure, as the tractor stood patiently or else was sputtering, burning gas, waiting for him to load. During that time his plowing was not being done because the tractor could not be in two places at the same time. When he did get to his plowing the ground was so hard he had a terrible time.

In making a comparison of time between tractors and horses, you have to take into account the time it takes to change equipment, and also tractor breakdowns and time lost stuck in the mud. Then you have to consider time out for repairs. Most of the tractors today are new, but I notice that when I want to get my car fixed the garage is full of tractors awaiting repair, and they haven't time to fix it. This situation will get worse as the tractors get older, and I doubt if the new high speed jobs will stand up as well, either.



Social, Political and Economic Values

We've said quite a lot about the advantages of doing specific farm jobs with horses, and we've touched on some of the disadvantages in operating farms with tractors. But to me this whole subject of horses versus tractors is much bigger and more far reaching. I believe there are important social, political and economic values at stake. And I want to discuss some of these.

I think the horse provides a big chance for any young man to start farming. If he hasn't much money to start, he can buy some horses and the needed equipment for a small investment. You can buy a horse drawn gang plow around our way for \$2.00 or \$3.00, and a disc costs about the same.

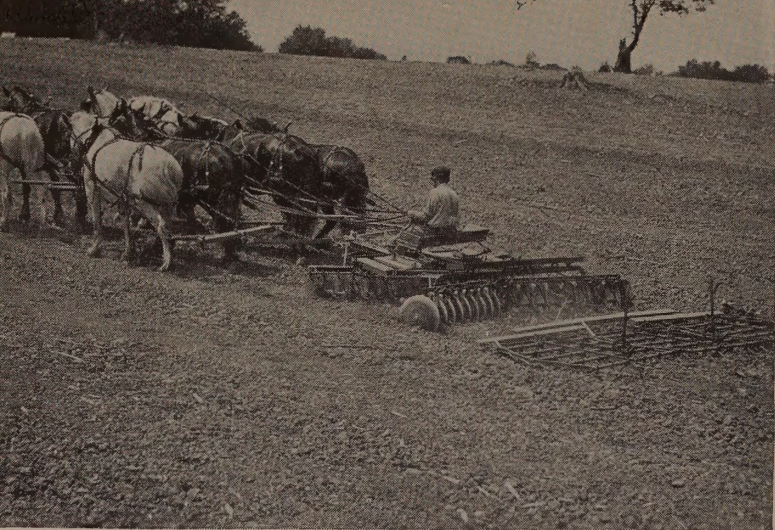
I have a story to tell you about a young man who was working for me who started farming on a shoe-string back in 1936. He said: "How can I ever get started farming? A man can't borrow any money and get started." I told him I thought there was a good chance to start farming with cheap horses and horse-drawn equipment, that he could probably rent a farm if he rented it cheaply enough, that the main thing was to keep his overhead down.

So he began looking around for a farm. About a year later he came to me and said, "I know where I can rent a 160-acre farm at around \$540 a year. Would you rent it?"

I said, "I would rent it if the other man would rent it to me, but I know that you haven't any equipment or any backing at all."

"No," he said, "I haven't money enough to buy the tail of a cow."





I told him I would loan him a team and help him when I could. His brother offered to help him out with a team, and gang plows, discs, and things like that were so cheap then that some people gave them to him. He got a part-time job to keep going. At that time he could get a government payment of about \$170 or \$180 and he rented his pasture out for around \$300. That paid most of the rent.

He got some sows, too, on a sort of farm-out method. All he had to go into debt for was a little feed for the hogs. That fall he came to me with a big smile. He said, "I have my rent all paid. I have twelve sows that will have pigs next spring. I have a little hay and grain on hand and a full line of machinery, such as it is and it's not so bad at that, and I don't owe for anything outside of a team of horses." From that small start he has continued to make progress and today he operates a splendid farm and is going along fine.

Another problem that we hear much about is that we are losing our family sized farms. The acreage size is increasing. It's not strange that some of the principal men who urge larger acreage are men very much interested in the farmers using bigger machinery. How can we use more machinery and at the same time keep our farms down to 160 acres? That was what they used to call a family sized farm. I don't know how big it is now.

Another point. The more we mechanize our farms the more we farmers become a minority group. As you noticed in the last election, the candidates weren't so much worried about what the farmers were going to do as they were about what labor was going to do. We have a smaller voice in things today than we used to. Along with this minority problem we also have our school problems. They are thinking about reorganizing the Iowa school system to reduce the number of schools just because the country population has decreased to such an extent.

A couple of weeks ago at a meeting, an Extension Service man spoke about saving feed. He had statistics to back up his statement that our horses are consuming as much feed as all of our dairy cows. I remember that I had also heard him say that the horse is gone, or would be soon. If both of these statements are true, where are we going to find another market after the war for all this feed that horses have been consuming?

The horse provides a market for our feed. The horse is a product of the farm and not of industry.

Whether they sell corn or whatever they have to sell, most farmers are very much interested in the price of corn or the other products whether they produce these products or not. Why shouldn't they be interested in horse prices? Horses consume feed that many times would either go to waste or reduce the average price of all feed.

Here is another thing that I want to bring out. When feed gets cheap we get more for our horses. In 1930 a man said to me, "You are foolish to raise horses. They are gone." But in 1932, the year that I suppose most of you have heard about, when you could not get very much for your corn or your hogs, I sold a team of horses that brought in as much money as my whole crop of corn was worth.

Summarizing Advantages of the Horse

There is no depreciation, especially when raising colts that are growing into money. Makes for more efficient use of help. Not the traction trouble because of having rubber or steel on at the wrong time. Plenty of reserve power. Not stuck with the plow or disc in soft places. Smaller investment in both horses and machinery. More capital for other investment, such as farm of your own or other livestock. Less danger, especially on rolling ground. More dependable power. Provides greater flexibility; the horse can do a lot of jobs the tractor can't do. Doesn't always need a driver, such as when going through gates, husking corn, delivering milk, and when doing many other jobs. Farmers using horses 100% have bigger selections for different jobs and for everyone in the family.

Some friend may like to read this—please pass it on.

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